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## THE GUERRILLAS IN THE BOARDROOM

What COIN Theory Teaches Leaders about Organizational Change, and  
How Corporate Change Models Could Transform Military Doctrine

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### **Abstract**

Counterinsurgency theory—the theoretical underpinnings of U.S. COIN doctrine, especially as expressed in the “Strategic Principles” and “Counterinsurgency Paradoxes” sections of Field Manual 3-24, Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies—shares much in common with popular change models for transforming organizations. Since the human dynamics underlying all group competitions are similar (whether at the nation-state or small organization level), all leaders can benefit from applying COIN theory to achieve significant organizational change in order to “win.” Conversely, military theorists and doctrine writers could improve both COIN theory and U.S. doctrine by studying and adapting elements of change models developed for civilian leaders. Indeed, it is likely that our nation’s ineffective counterinsurgencies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan would have charted a better course if our doctrine during these conflicts had included key aspects of popular change models.

*Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory.*<sup>1</sup>

—General Douglas MacArthur

*And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them.*<sup>2</sup>

—Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

## Introduction

The idea that war and unarmed competition are much alike is common. Athletes, especially football players, often call themselves “warriors” and games “battles,” and they speak of “going to war” or “fighting for each other.” The business world, too, borrows from the language of war, with phrases such as “hostile take-overs,” “corporate raiders,” and “corporate battlefields” being commonplace. Not only is

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<sup>1</sup> This quote has been enshrined in a monument at the Holleder Center, West Point’s basketball and hockey arena. My sincere thanks go to the following friends for their insightful feedback to this essay’s first draft: Arnold R. Isaacs, journalist and author of *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* and *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy*; Colonel Clark Barrett, infantry officer and author of “Finding the Right Way: Toward an Army Institutional Ethic”; and Charles Mink, interrogator, sociologist, and author of “It’s about the Group, Not God: Social Causes and Cures for Terrorism.”

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by W.K. Marriott (Sweden: Wisehouse Classics, 2015), 27. The purpose of *The Prince* is to serve as a guidebook for how autocrats can remain in power and improve their wealth and influence. This is not a moral purpose, one that produces principles of conduct applicable to all of society. But to Machiavelli’s credit, he knows human nature well enough to conclude that a prince’s exhibiting broadly acceptable social values usually “works” (i.e., helps the prince keep or increase his influence). Consider, for example, Machiavelli’s admonition on the importance of avoiding the public perception that they are corrupt: “Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred; because he can endure very well being feared whilst he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women.”

the terminology of war rife in sports and business, the actual study of war is popular among those seeking a competitive edge, as evidenced by the popularity of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and the many books and articles that interpret Sun Tzu for the businessman and coach. It is no wonder that civilian leaders so esteem the ancient philosopher. His emphasis on non-violent victory reflected an understanding of war that transcended armed conflict. "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill," he wrote. "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."<sup>3</sup>

You need look no further than Carl von Clausewitz, the great Prussian strategist, for why the study of war is something from which all leaders, military and civilian, can benefit. In the first section of *On War* (titled, "On the Nature of War"), Clausewitz defined war's "nature" and short-lived "character." War's "nature," he wrote, is that of a violent competition in which each side strives to impose its will upon its opponent via physical force, while a specific war differs in "character" from other wars because of the unique interplay between this war's motivations and the circumstances in which it is fought.

War, thus, is the form of competition between groups that includes lethal violence. Within war's "nature," you find what is quintessentially human about ancient and modern armed conflict. Every modern war, for example, can be viewed as being fought for the same three reasons that Thucydides, the Athenian historian, identified 2,500 years ago: honor, self-interest, and fear. There is also, as the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay and the classicist Robert Emmet Meagher point out, little difference between how war impacted the psyches of ancient Greek warriors and how war affects U.S. combat veterans today. Unless our species' DNA dramatically evolves, war will always display similar group dynamics, psychology, and perceptions of right and wrong conduct—the same human verities that underlie non-violent forms of competition.<sup>4</sup>

### Why COIN Theory Applies to More than Armed Conflict

While the connection between war and other forms of conflict is implicitly recognized within the language of competition, the broad applications of "counterinsurgency (COIN) theory" within the civilian world are generally missed. By "COIN theory," what I mean is the philosophical underpinnings of U.S. COIN doctrine, especially as expressed in the "Strategic Principles" and the "Counterinsurgency Paradoxes"

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<sup>3</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 77.

<sup>4</sup> This sentence deliberately echoes the strategist John Boyd's famous division of war into three dimensions, the "mental," "moral," and "physical." Left out of my sentence are the physical aspects of war, which do evolve with technological progress. Implied in my sentence is the inclusion of a fourth human dimension, the "sociological."

sections of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*.<sup>5</sup> COIN theory considers the competition between counterinsurgent and insurgent to be at bottom a struggle for legitimacy and influence within a given population. When a government loses legitimacy and political dissent turns violent, killing or capturing armed insurgents become necessary. However, COIN theory contends, lethal or harsh acts are ineffective tools if they shrink popular support.<sup>6</sup>

Substitute “non-violent offensive actions” or “passive aggressive resistance” for an armed insurgency’s lethal violence, and you describe the problem that leaders usually face who seek to dramatically change their organizations. When leaders seek such change, as in a counterinsurgency, the real battle between leaders and “insurgents” is for popular opinion within the organization. Whichever side achieves “buy-in” from the majority of an organization’s members will ultimately determine this organization’s azimuth.

Why do some subordinates seem to always resist significant change? Thucydides’ list – “honor, interest, and fear” – answers this question. One driver of resistance lies in deep-rooted organizational culture or “identity”: “Insurgents” may see themselves as protecting from assault a vital element of the organization’s identity. Another driver may be the perceived impact that proposed change will have on existing power structures and pay. A third may be subordinates’ fears that change will lead to their being demoted, moved, or losing their job. As in an armed insurgency, resistance typically coalesces around some combination of all three drivers.

The linkage drawn here between COIN theory and organizational change is nothing new. In published writings, some military authors, often veterans of recent wars, have made this connection. In 2010, for example, Dick Couch called for the U.S. military to fight the “moral pirates” within the ranks who were responsible for such debacles as Abu Ghraib and Bagram.<sup>7</sup> Later that year, I translated Couch’s point

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014), 1-19 – 1-21, 7-1 – 7-3.

<sup>6</sup> When counterinsurgents fail to adequately account for the political effects of their actions, it becomes possible for the counterinsurgent to “win every battle but lose the war.” The French experience in Algeria in the 1950s and 60s and America’s wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq illustrate the difficulties that arise when a military fails to adequately translate tactical into moral and political success.

<sup>7</sup> Dick Couch, *A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct in the Insurgent Battlespace* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 5-6. Couch uses the term “moral pirate.” For an interesting approach to countering a moral insurgency that is more Kotteresque than COIN, see Colonel Clark C. Barrett’s “Finding the Right Way: Toward an Army Institutional Ethic,” Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2012, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1129.pdf>. Part of Barrett’s solution to the problem of moral insurgents was a new written professional ethic—the type of vision statement that Kotter argues is essential for organizations to meaningfully change.

into Army-speak and went one step further, calling for an ideological COIN campaign against the U.S. Army's most important enemy: the "moral insurgent" within the U.S. Army's ranks.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, Chad Christian argued for the application of COIN theory to fight a specific type of moral insurgent: those responsible for a climate in which sexual assault and harassment flourish.<sup>9</sup> There are many other such examples.

What is original about this essay is the argument that COIN theory has broader applications than the fight against an organization's moral insurgents. I will present COIN theory as a useful model to follow for all leaders who seek significant organizational change of any kind. Also relatively fresh is the argument that, conversely, organizational change models well known to business leaders can greatly improve both COIN theory and doctrine.

To demonstrate COIN theory's relevance as a change model, I will employ a case study, one that is drawn from a personal experience that I later came to view as a successful COIN campaign. Along with that retrospective insight, I also realized that if my bosses and I had knowingly applied COIN theory from the start, this campaign would have ended much sooner—not to mention been much less painful for all concerned.

### The Case Study

*I had been the executive officer of a recruiting battalion for four months when a stolid, square-jawed lieutenant colonel of medium height and build and neatly groomed black hair popped his head into my office. "Doug, come with me," he directed. "I want to talk to you." The man was my soon-to-retire battalion commander. "I wonder what this is about," I thought, as I got up and dutifully followed him to his office. He closed his office door behind us, sat down on a cushy leather chair in front of his enormous desk, and gestured for me to sit across from him.*

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<sup>8</sup> My "We Have Met the Enemy, and He is Us" won the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic's 2010 "Top Essay" Award. It is no longer available online. A follow-on essay spoke more briefly to the Army's need to counter moral insurgents within the ranks: "Controlling the Beast Within: The Key to Success on 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Battlefields," *Military Review* (January-February 2011), 2-12, [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20110228\\_art004.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20110228_art004.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Chad Christian, "Applying Principles of Counterinsurgency to the Fight against Sexual Assault in the Military: Countering the Insurgency within Our Ranks," *Military Review* (November-December 2013), 67-74, [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20131231\\_art012.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20131231_art012.pdf). I am grateful to Chad Christian for demonstrating the method I employ here to illustrate the linkage between COIN theory and organizational change (that is, for his use of U.S. doctrine's "principles" as reference points).



*Both of us seated, my boss and mentor looked almost embarrassed as he began to tell me about a complaint that had gone up to our brigade the week before. This complaint had involved two separate issues: my failing to secure a safe and my requiring that all civilians attend a monthly staff teambuilding luncheon. The brigade chief of staff had already spoken to me on the matter, I told my boss, and I now recognized that I could not order civilians to attend a luncheon (even if I were paying for the food myself) and had already decided to make attendance optional. I also told him that my not locking the safe was a non-issue since I had decided not to keep anything in there that, by regulation, needed to be secured.*

*My boss replied that he was not concerned about the substance of the complaint but rather he was concerned about what this complaint signaled. "Doug," he said, "I've seen this happen before. Complaints like this start small. But if you're not careful, it will turn into something large, probably an EO [Equal Opportunity] complaint." When I looked startled, he continued: "And the complaint won't have anything to do with EO. What it will have to do with is the fact that some staff members are having a tough time adapting to change. In the future, I want you to ensure that everything you do is by the book. This starts with your taking whatever civilian management courses you're supposed to take as soon as possible, so you know more of the rules." I told my boss I would take the civilian supervisors' course as soon as I could get in the course. He then told me that this was all he had really wanted to tell me, and after a brief chat about our families, I left his office.*

*I took the civilian supervisors' course right away and reflected upon the words of my boss, whose judgment I trusted and whom I still consider today one of the best leaders under whom I have served. But I had a tough time taking seriously the notion that I was professionally vulnerable to any complaint. There was reason to be overconfident. My boss had selected me for the job because, as he had told me, "I know you can do it." In my final year as a recruiting company commander, my company had enlisted more than 800 new soldiers, more than any of the other 39 companies in the brigade and 150 more enlistments than the company's previous highest total.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> My first sergeant's technical competence and smooth salesmanship had much to do with that success, but I had also played a part, personally leading recruiters into schools and enforcing a command climate based on rewards rather than punishment. Indicative of my company's high morale was the fact that all my recruiters re-enlisted who were eligible to re-enlist, and several of my detailed active-duty soldiers had chosen to become permanent recruiters. Before that job, I had commanded approximately 100 military intelligence soldiers in Baghdad, and if anything, that company had been more effective and had even higher morale than my recruiting company.

*It seemed especially absurd that anyone would accuse me of bigotry or sexism. In college, the one physical fight I had gotten into was with a fraternity brother for his using the “n” word, and I once won a university writing contest with an essay that explained why I hate the “n” word so much—and why everyone else should, too. My life-long best friend is a gay black man. I was then (and am still) married to a lovely Indian born and raised in Africa, and while some people would call our children “racially mixed,” I do not because I consider the distinction of “races” a meaningless one. There is only one human race—Homo sapiens.*

*What, me—Doug Pryer—be the subject of an EO investigation? Impossible!!*

*Regardless of my personal feelings on the subject, two months later, an African-American female on my staff filed an EO complaint against me. One month after that, I found myself sitting in the conference room of our new battalion headquarters with my employee, along with an Army lawyer and a case officer from the Department of Defense.. The employee’s complaint was that I had not promoted her to a higher position because I was racist. In fact, the person whom I had hired for that position was an African American female. The complainant alleged that this did not matter, though, because I had conducted all job interviews telephonically and thus had not realized that the new hire would be African American. (She did not know that it had been my boss and not me who had been adamant about not promoting her. I never told my employees that the battalion commander made that decision because I knew this employee was upset and I did not want to undermine my boss.) What really mattered, the complainant said, was that she deserved this job, I was “racist” for not giving it to her, and she should be given either the job or financial compensation for not getting it.*

*After I gave my testimony, the case officer told me to leave while the complainant stayed to hear other testimonies from the staff. That day was one of the worst days of my career. I was deeply offended by the false accusation and the accompanying office chatter. After all, it was not my leadership style but an important aspect of my identity that was being questioned!*

*Even though the complainant quickly decided to drop the allegation, the damage was done. The inquiry had become the casus belli for the staff’s tenured reactionaries, who made the most of the chance to rally under a common banner against me, the perceived agent of unwelcome change. Thanks to this battle cry and the inquiry’s uncomfortable procedures, which forced staff members to choose sides*

*in their testimonies before the complainant, what had been a small fault line on my staff between my supporters and those who had been unwilling to accept change widened into an emotionally fraught rift.*

*I had been an executive officer for only seven months, my staff was divided, and nearly everyone was unhappy and unproductive. My battalion commander soon retired, and my brigade commander and new battalion commander wondered out loud whether I should be removed from my position.*

*How had my headquarters and I reached this point?*

*It is clear to me today that little in my previous experience had prepared me for the challenge of trying to dramatically change a unit that included 20+ government service civilians—employees whom I largely had to persuade, rather than direct, to move in new directions. The goals that I had for my staff and I included our being “recruiter- and mission-oriented”; our routinely leaving the comfort of our offices to visit recruiting stations, where we could teach and learn from recruiters; and our powering down decision-making to station commanders—or up to the battalion commander, if necessary. “Only the battalion commander can say ‘no’ to station commanders,” I told my staff. What I was after, in short, was a significant change in unit culture.*

*My staff was already upset that we had had to move into a new headquarters building (a move that my predecessor had planned but that I had implemented due to construction delays). At our previous, more expensive downtown location, there had been more office space and immediate access to restaurants, stores, and a fitness facility. My employees had been very comfortable there. They were also unhappy about the growing pressure cooker of an environment that recruiting was turning into, with the ever-growing demand from higher to “do more with less” while we rapidly grew our nation’s all-volunteer force in the wake of 9/11.*

*My advocating what amounted to a radical shift in philosophy compounded the shock already being felt by my civilian employees. Even worse than the timing with which I announced our new direction was my failure to achieve “buy-in” with any of my employees before this announcement. “Buy-in,” while certainly a nice thing to have, had never seemed to me a requirement for military leaders. Troops might grumble, but I had always been able to count on their performing legal orders to the best of their ability.*

*Ultimately, my staff and I would weather this crisis. What is more, my staff would rise to exceed my expectations, becoming the selfless, mission-focused and team-oriented organization I had originally hoped it would become. Rather than routinely deny station commanders' and recruiters' requests for support from the comfort of their offices, they listened to recruiters, worked hard to support their requests, and often personally visited stations and recruiting events to assess and help. My staff was responsive, adaptive, and worked harder and more efficiently than ever. By the time I left the job, I was not only proud of my unit, I was personally fond of nearly all of my staff's members, some of whom I stayed in touch with for years afterwards.*

### **COIN Theory as Organizational Change Model**

After I left recruiting, I attended the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). There, I read with other Army majors an essay by Warren Bennis and Robert J. Thompson titled, "Crucibles of Leadership."<sup>11</sup> The authors argue that negative experiences are more important than positive ones in developing leadership skills. The experience recounted in the case study above would prove just such a "crucible experience." It was not the most painful formative leadership experience for me: that experience was personally witnessing our nation's wrong turn toward torture during the start of the "Global War on Terrorism." However, the experience recounted in this case study ranks up there.

When I was at CGSC, students studied two models for organizational change. One was authored by John Kotter, a former Harvard business professor who had spent nearly 40 years studying what worked and did not work for business leaders trying to transform their organizations. Based on that research, Kotter formulated eight steps: (1) Establish a Sense of Urgency, (2) Create a Guiding Coalition, (3) Develop a Change Vision, (4) Communicate a Vision for Buy-in, (5) Empower Broad-Based Action, (6) Generate Short-Term Wins, (7) Never Let Up, and (8) Incorporate Change into the Culture. The second change model in the CGSC curriculum was Tipping Point Leadership, so labeled in a 2003 *Harvard Business Review* essay by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne. This model argues that "once the beliefs and energies of a critical mass of people are engaged, conversion to a new idea will spread like an epidemic, bringing about fundamental change very quickly."<sup>12</sup> Rapid change, this model contends "can be unleashed only by agents who make unforgettable and unarguable calls for change, who concentrate their resources on what really

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<sup>11</sup> Warren Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, "Crucibles of Leadership," *Harvard Business Review* (September 2002), <https://hbr.org/2002/09/crucibles-of-leadership>.

<sup>12</sup> W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, "Tipping Point Leadership," *Harvard Business Review* (April 2003), <https://hbr.org/2003/04/tipping-point-leadership/ar/1>, 3.

matters, who mobilize the commitment of the organization's key players, and who succeed in silencing the most vocal naysayers."<sup>13</sup>

I will now apply COIN theory to my case study, comparing and contrasting the applicability of those principles with the steps outlined in these two popular change models.<sup>14</sup> A word of caution first: the point of leveraging COIN theory to enact organizational change is not to encourage adversarial relationships between leaders and those they lead. Rather, the point is to recognize that such relationships sometimes exist, they can serve as significant impediments to change, and they must improve if the organization is to change and grow. Leaders must listen to voices of dissent, and, ideally, they should possess the wisdom to determine how much of their employees' dissent is sound advice and how much is properly ignored. Tolerating high levels of "loyal dissent" is an essential quality of any learning and adaptive organization, and all bosses need to be prepared for the possibility that there are good reasons why employees feel significant change is a poor choice. Sometimes, as we Americans believe was the case during our own Revolutionary War, the "insurgent" is right to fight. Leaders must also keep in mind that, in the end, in organizations as in nations, no COIN campaign is successful that does not resolve any underlying and just grievances fueling the "insurgency."

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> These two change models are chosen based on personal familiarity and not because they share any obvious affinity with COIN theory. The choice of these two models, thus, is essentially random: if two other models had been taught at CGSC in 2009, I almost certainly would have chosen those other two models as reference points for this essay.

## The Guerrillas in the Boardroom

Table 1: COIN Theory as Nested within U.S. COIN Doctrine

STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES	PARADOXES
<b>Legitimacy is the Main Objective:</b> "Fostering development of effective governance by a legitimate government that can provide security and acts in the best interests of its people may be essential to countering an insurgency. Legitimacy can be seen as the willing acceptance of a government by its population."	<b>Sometimes, the More You Protect Your Force, the Less Secure You May Be:</b> "Ultimate success in counterinsurgency operations is normally gained by protecting the population, not the counterinsurgency force."
<b>Counterinsurgent Forces Must Understand the Environment.</b> "Successful conduct of counterinsurgency operations depends on thoroughly understanding the society and culture within which they are being conducted."	<b>Sometimes, the More Force is Used, the Less Effective It Is:</b> "The key to successful counterinsurgency operations is knowing when more force is needed, and when it might be counterproductive."
<b>Intelligence Drives Operations:</b> "Effective counterinsurgency operations are shaped by timely, relevant, tailored, predictive, accurate, and reliable intelligence, gathered and analyzed at the lowest possible level and disseminated throughout the force."	<b>The More Successful the Counterinsurgency is, the Less Force Can Be Used and the More Risk Must Be Accepted:</b> "As the level of insurgent violence drops, expectations of the population may lead to a reduction in direct military actions by counterinsurgents."
<b>Security under the Rule of Law is Essential:</b> "Whenever possible, security forces should be provided by the host nation . . . To succeed in countering an insurgency, the host-nation government must develop its legal and conflict resolution systems, including police forces, judicial systems, and penal facilities."	<b>Doing Nothing is Sometimes the Best Action:</b> "Often insurgents carry out a terrorist act or guerrilla raid with the primary purpose of enticing counterinsurgents to overreact, or at least to react in a way that insurgents can exploit."
<b>Counterinsurgent Forces Should Prepare for a Long-Term Commitment:</b> "Insurgencies may persist for many years after the main threat has been broken . . . The population must have confidence in the staying power of both the affected government and any counterinsurgency forces supporting it."	<b>Some of the Best Weapons for Counterinsurgents Do Not Shoot:</b> "Every action, including the use of force, must be supported by adequate information."
<b>Manage Information and Expectations:</b> "Information and expectations are related; skillful counterinsurgency forces manage both."	<b>The Host Nation Doing Something Tolerably is Normally Better Than Us Doing it Well:</b> "It is just as important for counterinsurgents to consider who performs an operation as to assess how well it is done."
<b>Use the Appropriate Level of Force:</b> "Any use of force generates a series of reactions. There will be times when an overwhelming effort is necessary to destroy or intimidate an opponent and reassure the population. However, counterinsurgency forces, whether they are land, maritime, or air, calculate carefully the type and amount of force to be applied and who wields it for any operation."	<b>If a Tactic Works This Week, It Might Not Work Next Week; If It Works In This Province, It Might Not Work In The Next:</b> "Competent insurgents are adaptive. They are often part of a widespread network that communicates constantly and instantly. Insurgents quickly adjust to successful counterinsurgency practices and rapidly disseminate information throughout an insurgency."
<b>Learn and Adapt:</b> "An effective counterinsurgency force is a learning organization."	<b>Many Important Decisions Are Not Made by Generals:</b> "Successful counterinsurgency operations require competence and judgment by Soldiers and Marines at all levels. Indeed, young leaders often make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences."
<b>Empower the Lowest Levels:</b> "Leaders encourage individual initiatives and facilitate the learning that must occur at every level."	
<b>Support the Host Nation:</b> "In the end, the host nation has to win on its own."	

Source: U.S. Army, FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, May 2014, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014, 1-19 – 1-21, 7-1 – 7-3.

### *COIN Principle 1: Legitimacy is the Main Objective*

Central to COIN theory is the idea that the most enduring blow that a government can strike against an insurgency is strengthening perceptions of its own “legitimacy” within the governed nation.<sup>15</sup> A degree of “legitimacy” came with my appointment as battalion executive officer. I was selected for the job in a process perceived by my staff to be legitimate. Nonetheless, to retain or increase my legitimacy, I needed to earn my staff’s trust. Gaining their trust proved to be hard work. It demanded constant messaging via group discussions, emails, and one-on-one conversations with employees, and it required ensuring my actions supported my words. Also, after the rift that initially developed within my staff, trust depended upon the passage of time. Once trust was earned, desired changes occurred with the amazing rapidity that Tipping Point Leadership promises.

The critical importance of building trust permeates U.S. doctrine. The COIN manual states that the “population must identify with and trust their government;” a “whole of government” approach will not work unless interagency members trust one another; commanders must practice “mission command” and “trust their subordinates to do the right thing” in a decentralized, dangerous environment in which leaders may not see all of their subordinates every day; and service members must work hard to build trust with the local population, to include ensuring the “friendly force’s message” is consistent with their actions.”<sup>16</sup>

Tipping Point Leadership mirrors COIN theory in the unique emphasis it places on gaining popular support: when the majority buys into change and begins pushing toward leaderships’ goals, the “tipping point” is reached and real transformation then occurs with startling speed. Missing from Tipping Point Leadership, though, is the critical role that trust plays in achieving this “buy in.”<sup>17</sup> In the Kotter Model, achieving employee “buy in” is just one of eight equally important steps. This model does emphasize, however, the importance of building trust within members of the “guiding coalition” leading change. Kotter writes: “When trust is present, you will usually be able to create teamwork. When it is missing, you

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<sup>15</sup> The definition of “legitimacy” is conceptually fluid, not concrete. In general, it refers to a population’s willingness to accept their government’s right to rule them. When considering the employment of a harsh tactic (such as lethal violence or village resettlement), leaders must keep in mind that the “population is the prize” and carefully consider the impact this action’s moral impact. In a non-COIN environment, a “harsh tactic” might involve firing, demoting, or moving someone.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Army, FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, 10-3, 1-18, 7-4, and 7-19 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> This conclusion is based on the absence of any mention of trust in Kim’s and Mauborgne’s seminal article on Tipping Point Leadership, cited above. It is possible that the broader literature on this model emphasizes trust.



won't.”<sup>18</sup> The foundational role that trust plays in Kotter's “guiding coalition” can be compared to U.S. doctrine's emphasis on the need for interagency members to trust each other.

### *COIN Principle 2: Counterinsurgent Forces Must Understand the Environment.*

The COIN principle second only to legitimacy in importance is that counterinsurgents must understand the environment in which they operate. Without this understanding, counterinsurgents will struggle to find the right levers to push to get something done, and they may choose policies and actions that unintentionally alienate locals.

When I accepted the job of recruiting battalion executive officer, I could easily pick out my headquarters' formal leaders. They were those holding leadership billets designated by the battalion's formal Table of Distribution and Allowances (TDA). Among my military subordinates, there was little difference between their formal rank and the authority that they exercised informally. As is common throughout our military, a senior non-commissioned officer might exercise more informal influence than a junior officer. But, generally speaking, my military subordinates' official rank and position roughly defined the extent of their influence.

However, I was slow to understand that this was not the case with my civilian employees. I was also slow to realize just who my civilian employees' informal leaders were, as well as the fact that these informal leaders had, over their many years of service, built up a parallel power structure to the formal hierarchy led by the officers and NCOs cycling through on short tours. This informal hierarchy was based on long-term relationships, even friendships, not TDA. At the conceptual level, this rival power structure was a kind of unarmed “shadow government,” akin to the unrecognized “governments” that the Viet Cong, Kosovar Albanian, Taliban, and Sunni insurgents ran during recent insurgencies.

U.S. doctrine talks about how providing essential services (education, security, electricity, trash removal, sewage disposal, etc.) can aid a government's perceived legitimacy. Insurgent shadow governments, such as that run by Muqtada Al-Sadr when I was in Iraq in 2003-4, likewise attempt to provide essential services in order to add to their movement's legitimacy.

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<sup>18</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 63.



The essential service that my headquarters' shadow government provided to my employees was not tangible like trash removal and sewage disposal. Instead, the essential service provided was an employee's sense that he or she belonged to the group. There were even "shadow courts" to enforce this sense of belonging: go along with what the informal groups' leaders wanted, and you were accepted as "one of us," but go against this group, and you were shamed, even shunned. Behind closed doors, "insurgent" leaders could bring the motives and actions of formal leadership into question and decide how civilian employees would collectively respond. Would a policy be embraced? Would it be resisted? If resisted, how would it be resisted?

Unlike COIN theory, the Kotter Model places little emphasis on the importance of learning the environment. This is not the case with Tipping Point Leadership. This model's seminal article tells the story of William Bratton, the police commissioner in New York City twice and Los Angeles once.<sup>19</sup> Bratton, who enjoyed remarkable success reducing crime, directed his subordinates to "organize community meetings in schoolrooms and civic centers so that citizens could voice their concerns to district sergeants and detectives."<sup>20</sup> Bratton's technique is an intriguing twist on the tactic promoted by U.S. doctrine, which encourages counterinsurgents to meet with councils of local leaders rather than with entire communities.<sup>21</sup>

### *COIN Principle 3: Intelligence Drives Operations*

This COIN principle, which values the importance of learning the identities, motivations, activities, and plans of insurgents, is properly a sub-set of Principle 2. It is arguably over-emphasized in current U.S. doctrine.<sup>22</sup> There are of course limits to leaders' application of this principle within their organizations. In

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<sup>19</sup> W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, "Tipping Point Leadership," 1. Also see William Bratton's memoir, co-authored with Peter Knobler, titled *Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic* (New York: Random House, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, "Tipping Point Leadership," 6.

<sup>21</sup> "Counterinsurgents also participate in local council meetings that include representatives from different generations of the population." U.S. Army, FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, 10-3.

<sup>22</sup> In the influential essay, "Fixing Intelligence," three authors (the senior intelligence officer for coalition military forces in Afghanistan, a Marine captain, and the Defense Intelligence Agency's senior advisor of civilian/military integration for these forces) recommended "sweeping changes to the way the intelligence community thinks about itself – from a focus on the enemy to a focus on the people of Afghanistan." The intelligence being provided in Afghanistan, they argued, was largely irrelevant since it was not helping to resolve the sources of complaint within the population. Sarah Chayes fleshed out this argument in *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), dedicating an entire chapter to criticizing how U.S. intelligence focuses on "identifying and targeting individual terrorist suspects" while dedicating few resources to understanding environments and the power structures and grievances of communities. Such a monomaniac focus

combat, insurgents have no right to privacy. In a free nation like the United States, military and civilian subordinates do have this right. Moreover, even when it is legal, the thought of a boss prying too deeply into the details of employees' personalities, motivations, and activities is downright creepy. This COIN principle, thus, best translates into the civilian world as the common advice that bosses should "know the people who work for them."

In that broader sense, "intelligence collection" means leaders' keeping their eyes and ears open. In combat, analysts make "network diagrams" that display insurgent roles and relationships. As battalion executive officer, I eventually learned the informal network of friendships and influence that knit my people together. If a group of employees had lunch together, I made a mental note of it. Eventually, such "intelligence" enabled me to better shape my actions toward my employees. If I learned that one person in a clique was discontented, I knew that I would have to discretely address this source of discontentment, not just with that person, but with other members of this person's clique. In the long run, "knowing the network" helped me to know whom to engage when to coopt that network into supporting change.

Taking an active interest early in knowing my employees would have prevented some stupid early mistakes. For example, when we moved our headquarters, my staff moved into a building that I inflexibly chose to split between an "operations" wing and a "support" wing. It was a good idea in theory, but in practice, it meant that my most influential and ambitious informal leader received a much smaller office. This fact became a grievance for this leader. If my intelligence had been better from the start, I would have chosen the practical over the theoretical best solution and put this leader in a nicer office. Fortunately, though my own learning curve was steep here, my next battalion commander proved extraordinarily adept at gathering and leveraging this type of intelligence.

In contrast to COIN theory, Tipping Point Leadership places little emphasis on insurgent-centric intelligence (though it does mention the need to identify and silence "vocal naysayers"). Kotter is more aligned with COIN theory here. He describes two types of employees who interfere with change: "snakes" and "reluctant players." "Snakes" are employees with big egos who see their leaders as rivals and who actively work to damage the trust between leaders and the led.<sup>23</sup> "Reluctant players" are those who are afraid of change but can be persuaded after much effort to become integral members of a leader's guiding

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on the enemy, she asserted, causes U.S. military forces to ignore what they should be focused on—recognizing and reducing the corruption that can drastically reduce a population's support for its government.

<sup>23</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 61-62.

coalition.<sup>24</sup> This idea is roughly analogous to the COIN concept of insurgents who are “irreconcilable” or “reconcilable.”<sup>25</sup> “Irreconcilables” are Kotter’s “snakes,” dedicated insurgents who cannot be convinced or coerced into abandoning their resistance to established authority, while “reconcilables” are insurgents who can be encouraged, with much time and effort, to support the government.

### *COIN Principle 4: Security under the Rule of Law is Essential*

This COIN principle stresses the importance of providing physical security to the population. As a recruiting battalion executive officer, there was little need for me to worry about my staff’s physical security. Rather, my civilian employees were afraid that change would negatively affect their economic security, and at least a couple cared about maintaining or expanding their formal and informal influence within the headquarters. If I had recognized these concerns immediately, I could have allayed my employees’ feelings of insecurity sooner.

This principle also emphasizes the need for “legal and conflict resolution systems” that will add to the host nation government’s legitimacy. The most important role my new battalion commander played in helping to enact change within the staff was that of trusted arbiter. When he first came on board, the employees who were most resistant to change frequently met him in his office, lodging their concerns. He listened to them carefully and, with fresh eyes, saw how he could compromise on minor issues in such a way as to assuage egos and build trust while not altering the basic direction the staff needed to travel. Over time, the importance of his role as arbiter diminished. His and my efforts became synchronized, and all but one of my employees started stopping by my office and opening up to me about concerns they had. Nevertheless, the fact that an “appeals process” existed no doubt meant a great deal to at least a few of my employees.

Interestingly (and I think incorrectly), the need for a conflict resolution system that is viewed by employees as fair or “just” is described neither by Kotter nor Tipping Point Leadership as vital to successful organizational change.

### *COIN Principle 5: Counterinsurgent Forces Should Prepare for a Long-Term Commitment*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>25</sup> The idea of an enemy being divided into “reconcilables” and “irreconcilables” is referenced in the 2006 but not the 2014 COIN field manual. A British general and COIN expert, Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb, is credited with popularizing the terms.

This COIN principle implicitly speaks to the political nature of insurgencies. Even though counterinsurgent forces may militarily defeat a specific insurgent organization, like the Hydra of classical mythology that could sprout two new heads for every head that Hercules severed, unresolved political grievances can lead to defeated insurgent groups being succeeded by like organizations. Adequately addressing those grievances can take years, decades, or even generations.

When I left my job as battalion executive officer, I was very happy with my staff's performance and attitude. However, with regard to at least one employee, this change was superficial. Less than a year after I left the organization, a new battalion commander reached out to me. He wanted my sworn statement to help him fire this employee—the very informal leader with whom I had struggled the most. Echoing my two battalion commanders' earlier complaints, the new battalion commander considered this leader to be obstructionist.

The problem of a simmering insurgency is a familiar one to counterinsurgents. The U.S. military has rotated troops in and out of COIN conflicts, most recently in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. By the end of their rotations, "successful" units would achieve a degree of unstable quiet within their areas of responsibility. As soon as these units redeployed, though, insurgents would often test the resolve and effectiveness of new units.

Tipping Point Leadership theory assumes away this idea, essentially arguing that positive change, once effected, is enduring. The Kotter Model comes closer to the truth. Kotter argues that change must be "anchored" in organizational culture for this change to endure. He writes:

In the final analysis, change sticks only when it becomes "the way we do things around here," when it seeps into the very bloodstream of the work unit or corporate body. Until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change are removed.

Kotter argues that "anchoring" change requires two factors—a "conscious attempt to show people how specific behaviors and attitudes have helped improve performance" and "sufficient time . . . to ensure the next generation of management really does personify the new approach."

By now, it should be clear that COIN theory can be interpreted to accurately describe what worked and did not work to encourage positive change when I was a battalion executive officer. Interpreting the remaining COIN principles and the "counterinsurgency paradoxes" in the context of my case study is

probably unnecessary. So, I will just quickly interpret two of the remaining five principles and skip the paradoxes:

- *Use the Appropriate Level of Force.* Trying to eliminate the "shadow government"—the informal network of friendships and alliances that had taken shape in my headquarters staff over many years—would have been unrealistic and foolish. My battalion commanders and I could not have done this even if we had wanted to (which we did not). Far more effective was co-opting this network to support my commanders' overarching visions and my nested vision for my staff. Once reconcilables were on board with change and the one or two irreconcilables chose to at least temporarily stop blocking change, this informal network proved indispensable in advancing and reinforcing our goals.
- *Learn and Adapt.* Although I am not proud of the mistakes of inexperience that contributed to my being the subject of an EO investigation, I am happy with how I adapted in that investigation's wake. I could have overreacted by taking out my anger, not on the employee who initiated the investigation, but on the informal leader whom I most blamed for it. That is, in COIN parlance, I could have tried "excessive force." That would have been a disaster leading to a toxic climate and, probably, to a "whistleblower protection" or another EO investigation and my removal from my job. Today, I consider the overall experience an especially formative one as a leader. I have not been asked in my career, either insider or outside of a combat zone, to do anything harder than change the culture of that particular unit. The experience gave me a lesson in humility. It also imparted other lessons that I would need in future leadership roles, including two jobs in which I would be asked to help steer units with both service members and government service civilians through periods of great change.

### **Transforming U.S. Doctrine**

As a change model, COIN theory resonates with me more than other models. What resonates most is COIN's emphasis on enhancing the legitimacy of established authority, the requirement for leaders to thoroughly understand their environment, and the need for a conflict-resolution system that the "population" perceives as fair. To further refine COIN theory as a change model, a database of thousands of like case studies from the civilian world could be collected and analyzed through the COIN lens. I suspect that if this were done, COIN theory would prove a superior change model. This would only make sense.

After all, via the rigorous study of thousands of counterinsurgencies, scores of thinkers have shaped COIN theory into the distilled form expressed in U.S. doctrine.

There are a number of areas, though, in which U.S. doctrine writers could greatly benefit from the study of popular change models from the business world. Indeed, it is likely that our nation's ineffective counterinsurgencies in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan would have charted a better course if our doctrine during these conflicts had included key aspects of popular change models. I will touch briefly upon three such aspects.

Doctrine writers should study Kotter's emphasis on a guiding coalition's "change vision." "Vision," Kotter writes, "plays a key role in producing useful change by helping to direct, align and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people." He argues that, to be successful, this vision must be supported by a sense of urgency within the team, should be implemented by the right guiding coalition, and needs to be clearly and frequently communicated. He talks about how difficult it can be to design this change vision when there is little teamwork and guiding coalition members focus on "protecting their subgroup's narrowly defined interests," and he contends that strong leadership from outside the guiding coalition needs to apply constant pressure on this coalition to prevent the development of its vision from stalling.

Kotter's ideas here can be applied many different ways to a COIN campaign. I have already mentioned how Kotter's "guiding coalition" can refer to the interagency members working together. Another application (say, in Iraq and Afghanistan) would have been to equate the "change vision" with the Iraqi and Afghan governments' new constitution and the "guiding coalition" with the legislative bodies who drafted and signed these constitutions. This application suggests that all levers of international and interagency power need to be applied to ensure sufficient pressure on legislative bodies to ratify a constitution that bridges competing interests and that the population will view as legitimate. At the operational and tactical levels, counterinsurgents could use this approach to ensure that local governing frameworks do not become sources of grievances. Kotter provides an example of how this could be done:

Instead of backing down when the conflicts emerged, the boss gently but firmly pushed ahead. He used his not inconsiderable interpersonal skills to keep the pressure at a tolerable level. If he had skipped the first two phases of the transformation process, the meeting might have blown up. But having developed a sense of urgency and established a healthy degree of trust and a shared commitment to excellence, the group was able to

work its way through a difficult set of topics and tentatively agree on a modified version of the document.<sup>26</sup>

Another area in which U.S. doctrine writers could benefit from studying Kotter is in his emphasis on anchoring change in local culture. U.S. doctrine does not acknowledge that the counterinsurgent *can* change local culture, let alone that counterinsurgents *should* change local culture. The assumption is that local culture is unalterable by outsiders.

This assumption is wrong. Whether we openly acknowledge cultural change as a goal or not, U.S. COIN operations *have* changed local cultures. Those changes have brought mixed results. For instance, it is an unqualified positive that, in Afghanistan, a growing share of the population sees women as capable of assuming careers previously reserved for men, such as the jobs of politicians, business owner, and police officer. Less helpful is that, since 9/11, feelings of entitlement in Kabul have simply shifted from the majority Pashtun population to the minority Tajiks and Hazara, and, in Baghdad, from the minority Sunni population to the majority Shi'a. And it is an unqualified negative that, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, a huge influx of poorly vetted international spending has fueled a rampant culture of corruption within the host nation governments.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, Transparency International ranked Iraq and Afghanistan as, respectively, the eighth and third most corrupt governments in the world.<sup>28</sup> A 2007 survey showed a majority of Afghans believing their government to be the most corrupt in the previous 20 years—to include not only the Taliban regime but the notoriously corrupt warlord rule that fueled the Taliban's rise in the early 1990s.<sup>29</sup> New lows of corruption in Iraq and Afghanistan are often cited as the biggest source of ongoing instability in those two countries.<sup>30</sup>

Does it not make more sense to carefully consider cultural change and make conscious, deliberate steps to anchor change in culture than to make no such plans and inadvertently deliver mixed or negative cultural results?

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<sup>26</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Not only Sarah Chayes' *Thieves of State* but Douglas Wissing's *Funding the Enemy: How US Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012) compellingly support the idea that the U.S.-led occupation in Afghanistan fueled previously unseen levels of governmental corruption in Afghanistan.

<sup>28</sup> Transparency International, "Corruptions Perceptions Index 2015," <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015#results-table>.

<sup>29</sup> Khaleej Times [UAE], "Afghan government more corrupt than Taliban: Survey," March 19, 2007, <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2007/03/19/afghanistan-seen-as-most-corrupt-in-decades-survey.phtml>.

<sup>30</sup> For Iraq, see, for example, Transparency International's "Iraq: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption," [http://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Country\\_profile\\_Iraq\\_2015.pdf](http://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Country_profile_Iraq_2015.pdf). For Afghanistan, see, for example, Kenneth Katzman's, "Afghanistan: post-Taliban governance, security and US policy," Congressional Research Service: Washington DC, 27 April 2015, 16, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/174244.pdf>.

A third area in which COIN could learn from business models is to be found in Tipping Point Leadership. This area is a technique really, one with much greater ramifications than is immediately clear. U.S. doctrine writers should consider incorporating Police Commissioner Bratton's method for gathering information, which involved police officers meeting directly with communities. This is preferable to counterinsurgents meeting only with key leaders, which is what U.S. doctrine prescribes.<sup>31</sup> As Sarah Chayes points out in her book, *Thieves of State*, the U.S.'s leader-centric approach in Afghanistan failed to account for the fact that many of the Afghan leaders with whom U.S. forces met had been seduced and corrupted by the large sums of U.S. dollars available and cared more about their own self-interest than representing the groups that they ostensibly led.<sup>32</sup> Over time, engaging with "key leaders" rather than with communities contributed to rampant corruption and a host nation government and counterinsurgent force who could not hear the voices of ordinary Afghans.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion: So, You Want to Be Revolutionary?**

It may seem strange to equate change with COIN theory when the COIN doctrine it is nested within is designed to keep a select foreign government in power. After all, are not insurgents the real revolutionaries? The answer to this question is "it depends." Sometimes, a government striving to adapt their nation to new circumstances creates a reactionary insurgency (as occurred at the small unit level in my case study). Sometimes, a nation's traditional ruling elite must adapt and address their people's honest grievances if they wish to stay in power. One of the great secrets of COIN theory is that this theory usefully and equally informs both counterinsurgent and insurgent. Both warring parties must win the competition for legitimacy, trust, intelligence, and the other advantages espoused by COIN theory if they are to survive. Most of COIN theory could just as readily be called "insurgency theory," since it is at bottom a change theory useful to anyone desiring to modify a group's behavior and "win."

There are many ways U.S. doctrine writers could learn from business change models. Vice versa, all leaders could benefit from studying COIN theory. Whether leaders are diplomats or corps commanders working to stabilize countries, division commanders or corporation leaders attempting to implement more

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<sup>31</sup> "Constant engagement of key leaders with the population is essential to enhancing understanding of the population and understanding of the counterinsurgency." FM 3-24, 6-4.

<sup>32</sup> "The classic error that outsiders make in Afghanistan is to single out a proxy in whom to repose trust and through whom to interact with most other locals . . . some Afghans have grown adept at capturing this privileged position and exploiting it to advance and enrich themselves while disempowering (and thus incensing) their neighbors." Chayes, *Thieves of State*, (2015), 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 31.



efficient practices in their organizations, lieutenants confronted with issues of racism or sexism within their platoons, school superintendents trying to influence teachers to take a more pro-active stance on bullying, or coaches trying to instill a culture of “winning,” all leaders face situations where a knowledge of COIN theory can help them implement change and create healthier, more adaptive organizations.

All leaders and thinkers have much to learn from each other about the challenges, heartbreaks, and joys of creating positive organizational change. To achieve more success faster, they must first ignore superficial differences in the forms of conflict and seek to understand the eternal human verities underlying group dynamics and competition.

Then, they just need to listen to one another.